

Et tu Edna?

Phillip Parotti

The condition had lingered for more than an hour. Indeed, Edna was certain that she had been reincarnated from the remains of a Viennese dung beetle. —Laugh if you must, but remember, I know Edna, and you do not.

“But Edna,” I protested, “Sartre is dead. The Beat Generation has passed into history. The idea is so . . . so *déclassé*.”

Edna merely pointed to her eyebrows. Admittedly, they are as coal black as a stoker’s hands—thick, protruding.

“Coincidental superficialities,” I wrote, with a commanding stroke of my pen.

“Oh, really!” Edna snapped. “Well, thank you very much!”

I had hurt her feelings, you see. I had not intended to, but one’s creations are so very, very sensitive.

“Look,” I said, “I’m sorry. That is not what I meant at all. That is not it, at all.”

“Now who’s wriggling on the wall?” Edna laughed.

She had escaped me again, and I seemed powerless to return her to form. “Edna,” I pleaded, “*please*. With mankind, forms, measured forms, are everything.”

“How very Melville of you,” said Edna, arching one thick eyebrow, “but *no*. There will be no divine judgements of Ananias passed on me, Mr. Vere, without some very clear attention to the fair facts.”

What those might have been—what they might be—I have no way of knowing. In time, perhaps, Edna may reveal them to me, but for the moment, I have reached an impasse. How I am to move beyond it remains one of the many unknowns against which I continue to find myself pitted. Perhaps, I should explain.

My intention had been to seat Edna and her friend, Recene, before a smart luncheon at the Ritz-Carlton—a small lobster salad, I think, accompanied by a single, chilled glass of white wine.

Recene, you see, had roomed with Edna at Smith. During their junior year, each young woman had fallen in love with the same young man—a Yale senior who intended to settle in the City and sell bonds. Subsequently, and quite by chance, each woman had discovered the other's feelings, rejected the young man for the sake of friendship, and resolved never to let anything again come between them. Following graduation and of necessity, each went her own way, but bound by mutual sacrifice, their friendship remained a source of strength to be renewed, quarterly, over lunch in Manhattan. Recently, Recene—now married—had conducted a minor infidelity, so in keeping with the custom of established form, she called the Ritz for reservations, arranging to meet Edna in the lobby at 11:45 a.m. "Dear," said Recene, "I need to share a little confidence."

That had been my starting point. I had worked well through the morning, breaking twice for coffee and once to let the cat out, and in so far as I was concerned, development was smooth. I had brought them both into the Ritz by that time, Edna from Franklin Lakes, Recene from Southampton; I had seated them after greetings, and I had placed menus in their hands. Edna was about to say, "Isn't spring lovely this year." Indeed, I had already put pen to paper, completing both the quotation marks and the capital *I*, but she never gave me a chance to complete the *sn't*. Instead, Edna arched one of those beetle brows, ignored Recene, who remained silent beside her, and threw me a sudden, deeply penetrating glance.

"It won't work," she said flatly.

"Pardon?" I said.

"It won't work," Edna said. "I've been watching you: you haven't the right stuff."

"Is this some sort of word game?" I wanted to know.

Edna ignored my remark. "Clearly," she said, "you stand no chance of publishing this in *The New Yorker*. Let me tell you something, *Herr Vere*—if you intend to write about New York, you must know something about it. To the best of my knowledge, you have never so much as seen Manhattan."

"Once," I protested, "I drove by it on my way to West Point."

"That, most certainly, does not count," Edna snapped.

She had a point. My sole exposure to New York had been through film. Still, I had no intention of giving in to her on this subject or any other. "In works of the imagination," I said tartly, "much, I think, may be left to the author's creativity."

Edna laughed. "Does that explain why you have so miscast your characters?"

"What are you talking about?" I demanded.

"Recene," said Edna. "In fact, *Herr Vere*, her name is Hilda. It has always been so. I have known her for a long time, *Herr Vere*, a very long time, indeed: we were school girls together in Vienna."

"I do not believe," I said, "that you have the slightest idea of what you are talking about." And with renewed concentration, I attempted to bring Edna back under control.

"Hilda was a Grebner," Edna said, eluding my efforts. "In 1963, she married Ernst Koen; *Herr Koen* manages a Swiss banking office in Bonn, and Hilda is devoted to him. She would rather die than commit 'an infidelity,' as you so disgracefully put it. Look at her face, *Herr Vere*. Can you see a trace of guile there, anywhere?"

I examined Recene's face intently. Adultery had been painted all over it with professional makeup brushes.

"I was not aware," I said, "that Recene had appeared on the pages of *Vogue*. When *did* she cease to be a mannequin?"

"You are, certainly," said Edna, "one of the dullest men with whom I have ever had the misfortune to work. Thank God that Franz was not so dense."

"Franz?" I said.

"Kafka. My being lent Franz his inspiration."

"You must be mad," I hastened to say.

"Where the sun and moon do not reach," Edna said, "there is marvelous scenery indeed!"

"Zen?" I protested. "Edna, you have leapt from Kafka to zen, and there is no earthly connection whatsoever!"

"Franz would have understood perfectly," said Edna, her dark eyes shining, "the precise point of connection which you have failed utterly to grasp."

I had had enough. I took a deep breath and marshalled my strength. "I am sorry," I said, "but this will have to stop now, absolutely. You are thirty-five, Edna; you are chic without being inordinately beautiful. You are moderately well educated. You have heard of Kafka, but you have never read him, and you know nothing at all about zen. At this moment, you are in the dining room of the Ritz-Carlton, and you are about to agree with Recene on a choice of lobster salad for lunch. Neither of you has ever been anywhere near Vienna. Your waiter, Carlo, has appeared beside your table; he is already congratulating himself on the size of the tip he believes that you are going to leave him. He is waiting expectantly, Edna. *Now*, give him your order and *proceed*." And I lifted my pen to await the event.

"*Nockerlin*," said Edna, speaking with a flawless Viennese

accent, "*Schweinbraten mit sauerkraut und apfel, apfel kuchen mit guss, und moselle.*"

Carlo smiled, made quick scratches on his pad, clicked his heels smartly, and disappeared across the room.

"I will not permit it, Edna," I said. "First, you have ordered enough for a family of five. Think of the expense. Think of the waste! If you would only stop to consider . . ."

"There will be no waste," Edna said emphatically. "Since the war, we Viennese indulge no waste. Hilda's family—Ernst and their three grown sons—will join us presently. Considering the size of the party, luncheon will be rather light."

"You are in New York, with Recene," I said flatly, "not Vienna."

"I am in Vienna, with Hilda," Edna said adamantly, "not New York. Really, *Herr Vere*, your persistent notion that you are in control, here, is becoming *most* annoying."

"Edna," I said, "I love you, but this cannot go on. You must forget Vienna. You *must* begin thinking, concentrating on lobster salad at the Ritz-Carlton. Recene will become agitated if she has to wait much longer; her little confidence will lose its poignancy. You must remember, Edna, that I am the author; as author, I control both characterization and setting. There is simply no way around that: you exist—if you exist at all—at my pleasure."

With that declaration, Edna seemed genuinely amused. "If I exist at all," she said, lighting a cigarette, "I exist on my own terms. Remember, *Herr Vere*, I first came to you out of the silences, springing fully formed from the forehead of my former incarnation."

"*Oh*," I said skeptically, "and what was that?" I received, of course, exactly what I deserved, making me instantly sorry that I had formulated the question.

"A Viennese dung beetle," said Edna, "as I attempted to explain to you earlier."

"That's absurd," I said, more than mildly put out.

"The absurd is much in vogue," Edna laughed. "But the truth is really quite mundane. In 1915, a small boy named Samsa journeyed from Vienna to Prague. In the right breast pocket of his coat, in a tiny painted box, my egg had been fixed by my mother's secretions. Not long after crossing the border, I was born—a dung beetle. Later, in my maturity, Samsa painted the name Gregor across my back in order to identify me as his pet. Subsequently, during high summer, Samsa left my box and me on the seat of a tram. *Herr Kafka*, of course, discovered me there, removed me to his rooms, liberated me, gave me the freedom to inspire him, and look what I

accomplished on his behalf. In the natural course of things, I died of winter in 1916 only to find myself reincarnated—in human form, in Vienna—at the beginning of the Russian occupation. Believe me, *Herr Vere*, I have experienced quite enough in the way of artificial constraints, first in Samsa's painted box and, then, in postwar Vienna. What is wanted, *Herr Vere*, is a cup of Viennese chocolate and the freedom to develop according to one's own needs and desires. If you cannot offer a character that much at least, please turn your attentions elsewhere."

"So," I said, not without hope, "you imply, then, that I *am* in control."

"Nothing of the sort," snapped Edna, removing a fleck of tobacco from the tip of her tongue. "What I imply, *Herr Vere*, is that your continued intransigence, your unyielding insistence on character and content, is decidedly *arrière-guard*, a not so subtle hinderance that borders clearly on Philistinism and a demented authorial chauvinism. You fly in the face of progress, *Herr Vere*; you are a party to the pre-structuralist heresy. Give it up, *Herr Vere*: embrace form. Let fictions *be*. I hunger for your affection, but I cannot return it unless you give me the freedom to do so. Give me that freedom, *Herr Vere*; let me lead you inevitably toward the *Prix Goncourt*."

Edna had made an impassioned plea, a more impassioned plea than I had thought her capable of making, and I would be remiss to deny the fact. I had tried to put her into character, and in the end, I found myself forced to admit that I had failed. Bitter, exhausted, frustrated beyond acceptable limits, I gave her her head.

"Carlo," Edna said instantly, "cold lobster salad for two, and a bottle of Puligny-Montrachet. Alright with you Recene?"

"Yes," said Recene, freshening her makeup with the help of a silver compact.

"Alright with you, *Herr Vere*," said Edna, turning briefly in my direction, "the Puligny-Montrachet, I mean?"

"Yes," I said, "whatever you think." □